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Thinking and Making: Art and Craft in Library of Congress Classification

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Introduction

Why are art and craft so widely separated in the Library of Congress Classification System? All classification schemes give insight into the worldviews of the time in which they were created, and library systems are especially illustrative of the cultures and cultural moments which shaped them. It is not difficult to locate examples of bias for example—based on race, ethnicity, gender- and nationality—in both Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) and the Library of Congress system (LC), which dominate the field of classification in American public and academic libraries; many books and articles going back to the early 1970s have pointed out these concerns (Berman, Foskett, Webster). The library profession seems to have had fewer conversations about bias as it affects different subject disciplines, however, and the separation between the subjects of art and craft proves an apt site for such a discussion, which has been a persistent and contentious one in the art world through the twentieth and into the twenty-first century (Auther, Bernstein). The separation of art and craft in LC, in N and TT respectively, compared to their co-location in DDC and other American library classification systems, suggests divergent approaches to the arts within librarianship, allowing insight to American views on the relative definitions of art and craft from the mid-nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries.

Context

What exactly is the difference between art and craft? Immanuel Kant, in his 1790 *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, plotted a boundary between the two that remains influential, asserting

that “art is…distinguished from handicraft: the first is called liberal, the second can also be called remunerative art. The first [art] is regarded as if it could turn out purposively (be successful) only as play, i.e., an occupation that is agreeable in itself; the second [craft] is regarded as labor, i.e., an occupation that is disagreeable (burdensome) in itself and is attractive only because of its effect (e.g., the remuneration), and hence as something that can be compulsorily imposed” (Kant 183). Elissa Auther offers a modern framing of Kant’s idea, suggesting that “fine art…is characterized by a self-sufficiency or ‘purposiveness without a purpose, [whereas] craft by contrast is characterized by a connection to an interest or purpose” (Auther xv). Echoes of Kant can be heard in contemporary discussions of the differences between art and craft. As the director of the Museum of Glass in Tacoma explained in 2003, “Our artists are working with ideas. Glass is just a medium for their expression (Bernstein 114). The charge that “craft works within the sphere of the familiar whereas art strives for creativity” and “radical ‘differentness’” leads to a value judgment, that art is therefore superior to craft (Fethe 131).

In western culture the borders of art and craft have fluctuated over time, and with every fluctuation there has been disagreement. In his 1993 article “Decorative Arts: A Problem in Classification,” Steven Blake Shubert neatly outlines the history of this divide. Starting in ancient Greece and moving through the Middle Ages, Shubert shows that the distinction currently drawn between art and craft did not exist until quite recently: “what are now considered the visual arts (painting, drawing, sculpture etc.) were then considered crafts on the same level with weaving, ceramics, and woodworking. Likewise, in the medieval European universities the liberal arts (grammar, rhetoric, logic, geometry, arithmetic, music, and

astronomy) did not include any of the visual arts (Shubert 77). According to Charles Fethe, "there has been a number of historical periods, such as in the Middle Ages, in which painters and sculptors saw themselves as basically craftsmen, creating attractive objects used in the conduct of daily life" (Fethe 134). W.J.T. Mitchell echoes Shubert's point: "the elevation of painting to the status of fine art is generally traced to the Renaissance, when it began to compete successfully with poetry in the pecking order of artistic disciplines" (Mitchell 1024). At the time of the Renaissance, the image of the artist was transformed "from that of a skilled craftsman in a specialized practice into that of a universal genius whose work synthesizes poetry, philosophy, and the sciences" (Mitchell 1024). The concept of art as predominantly aesthetic or contemplative and craft as merely useful, with "decorative arts" as an intermediate category of "three-dimensional utilitarian objects with aesthetic merit" (Shubert 77) was unheard of before the seventeenth century. But by the nineteenth century the prestige of art had long been on the rise.

Library of Congress Classification

In 1897 the collections of the Library of Congress were moved into the newly constructed Thomas Jefferson building near the Capitol in Washington DC. Until that time, books were organized on the Library's shelves using a modification of the classification system used by Jefferson himself, to whom the core of the collection had originally belonged (LaMontagne 28). Jefferson had been guided in his approach to classification by Enlightenment thinkers like Jean le Rond d'Alembert and Francis Bacon, who felt that all human knowledge could be organized into a unified, connected taxonomic tree. This idea strongly influenced American library

classification system creators like Melvil Dewey and Charles Ammi Cutter. DDC (first published in 1876), and particularly Cutter's 1882 Expansive Classification system (CEC), would in turn serve as models for LC.

Both Dewey's and Cutter's classification systems place all material culture, all things made by human hands, together, and in fact neither of these two classification systems makes much proximal distinction between what are considered fine arts and other arts. A great many nineteenth century devisers of library classification systems, from Dewey to Cutter to Brunet to Edmands to Perkins, placed art and craft side by side.[1]

[Take In Table 1: Dewey, Cutter, and LC Schedules]

The argument could be made that Dewey did see a separation between art and craft, since he placed many crafts, from sewing to blacksmithing, in the 600s (called Useful arts in the first edition). But this is still in close proximity to the fine arts (700s: Fine arts) where several other craft topics, like weaving and embroidery, came to be located. In his classification he acknowledged a close kinship between the two, which was codified by the second edition of DDC. Cutter similarly placed Art in a different but adjacent alphabetical class from Useful arts or Handicrafts, toward the end of the alphabet between R and W.

The Library of Congress classification system, developed between 1899 and 1903, hewed closely to Cutter's Expansive Classification in terms of subject order, reorganizing them in only

[1] Not everyone did. Otto Hartwig in the Halle Schema separates art and craft, as does J.C. Rowell (LaMontagne 188-218). Jacob Schwartz used an alphabetical mnemonic system in which U stood for Useful Arts and D for Decorative Arts (though Decorative and Fine Arts were one category).

one major respect. On April 21, 1899[2], J.C.M. Hanson, chief cataloger at the Library of Congress, outlined the new scheme of classes in a letter to Librarian of Congress Herbert Putnam (Scott 192). Hanson moved the fine arts (along with music and literature) away from the useful arts and placed the sciences between them (Miksa 19). The fine arts, class N, includes visual arts (painting, drawing, sculpture) and architecture, as well as decorative arts (NK). Craft is placed toward the end of class T (Technology) in Handicrafts/Arts and Crafts (TT), which includes woodworking, clothing manufacture, hairdressing, laundry work, and "home arts". The discipline of Literature (P) as well as all of Science, Medicine, and Agriculture (Q, R, and S) come between art and craft.

Library historians Edith Scott and Francis Miksa both refer to the "radical" shift Hanson made (Scott 193, Miksa 19), but neither theorizes as to why, and neither Hanson nor Putnam seems at the time to have addressed the philosophy behind the change. LC was, from the beginning, "a description of a physical collection, not a coherent epistemic ideology"(Higgins 251), more geared toward placing books on shelves in an understandable order than in creating an abstract schema mapping connections between branches of human knowledge of the kind that Jefferson had adopted for the collection that would form the basis of the Library of Congress after an 1814 fire destroyed the original library.[3] Scott asserts that "Hanson was less concerned

[2] This is the first dated documentation of the shifting of art away from craft in LC, according to Scott (192). In searching the Library of Congress Manuscript Archives, the authors were unable to find evidence of the shift earlier than this date. Leo LaMontagne suggests that "like all pioneers, Hanson, Martel and their assistants were more interested in the work than in its recording" (LaMontagne 234).

[3] Jefferson based his own system on Bacon's division of knowledge into memory, reason, and imagination. Once the Library's collections began to grow at an accelerated rate after mid-nineteenth century changes in United States copyright law (Cole and Aikin 5), and when it moved into its new building in 1897, Jefferson's system was deemed inadequate and a new system was sought, one that would be pragmatic (where should books go on the shelves? What should logically and practically be next to what?) rather than a theoretical characterization of the relationships between all human knowledge.

with the principles and theory of classification than he was with the practical aspects (Scott 223). In *Essays Offered to Herbert Putnam*, Hanson's successor Charles Martel says that "from the standpoint of the reference service of the library the…placing of Art, Literature, History and Religion at the end, with the physico-mathematical, biological, and social sciences proper preceding, would be a positive disadvantage, whatever interest or speculative value that arrangement might possess from the standpoint of methodology of classification" (Martel 328). He went on to call LC "natural" and "logical" (Martel 332). The change seemed an obvious one to the classifiers, in step with current thinking and in no need of debate or defense. It must have, to at least some extent, been motivated by what seemed logical as well as easy.

Yet there was no pressing need for a split between art and craft in LC, given that an open range in the N schedule existed in which craft could easily have been be accommodated (NL-NW). Since such an option was available, it seems likely that other forces were at work in determining the separation of art and craft.

Discussion

In creating their library classification systems, Melvil Dewey and Charles Cutter clustered together first sciences and then arts. Both categories were broadly conceived, from *scientia* (knowledge) and *ars* (skill: the application of knowledge). To investigate science is to seek to know the world, whether as a philosopher, a historian, or a mathematician. The arts put into practice what the sciences discover, bringing the hand to bear and not just the mind: hence not

only fine, but athletic, recreative, and fabricative arts, as well as the arts of communication and of war, all categories in Cutter's 1882 classification (see Table 2).

The Library of Congress departed from this paradigm. In J.C.M. Hanson's 1899 memo to Herbert Putnam, he advocated placing first "the humanities, in a wide sense, followed by the arts and sciences" (LaMontagne 228). Hanson's successor Charles Martel later echoed him when he said that "the character of the collections, the special development in the Library of Congress of the historical and social sciences justified, nay required, the treatment and placing first of the humanistic group" (Martel 328).

Unlike sciences/arts, the term *humanities* describes a group of subjects contextualized specifically by academia. According to Miksa, Hanson "was convinced that the primary clientele of the Library of Congress were…the student and the investigator" (Miksa 211), and one of Putnam's chief goals as Librarian of Congress was to expand the Library's mission beyond serving Congress[4] to acting as a national library with resources accessible by researchers and scholars (Cole and Aikin 7). Whereas Dewey and Cutter thought of art and craft as related in terms of an overall universal classificatory structure of human knowledge and endeavor, Hanson may have looked at LC's growing collection[5] and privileged topics he felt scholars would

[4] Colin Higgins has pointed out that the Library of Congress' primary intended user was a "late nineteenth-century congressman—a part-time landowner (agriculture is well served), one-time soldier (as is military science), sometime inventor (reflected in the uncomplicated division of the sciences), interested in his own country's history" in greater detail than that of any other nation (Higgins 259). The LC system was created with this user in mind. Works on Native American art are classed in E, not with other Western or non-Western art, for example (Walker 463), which likely reflects the Library's initial focus on serving Congress, who when called on to make decisions concerning Native Americans might have wanted all materials on their culture together, despite the philosophical impurity of this approach.

[5] Changes in copyright law in 1870 led to the addition of vast numbers of books, maps, pamphlets and other material published in the United States to the Library's collections (Cole and Aikin 5). Books on cooking, needlework and other topics that might not before have been acquired by the Library found their way to the

pursue by placing them earlier in the hierarchy, and fine art was among them along with music, literature and other humanities subjects. Scholarly interest took precedence over "casual" use, so books on scholarly aspects of topics were placed first and grouped together. Therefore books on painting or sculpture, considered academic subjects by the late nineteenth century[6], could be placed between music and literature in class N. Books on woodworking or dyeing, on the other hand, would of necessity be technical rather than scholarly—who could possibly have a scholarly interest in such topics?—and thus reside toward the end of class T. Books on foodways (anthropology, GT) as opposed to cookbooks (TX) also follow this pattern, as do books on the history and cultural significance of textiles (GN) versus books on making textiles[7]. LC's structure makes sense for a library that, while not affiliated with an educational institution, very much saw itself as serving scholars rather than casual users. A focus on scholarship would explain why books on the Bayeux Tapestry, clearly an artifact of great historical and cultural importance, merited placement in class N—NK to be specific—when embroidery technique books were classed in TT.

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shelves, and while they would not have been considered to be of interest to scholars they could be made available to "desultory readers" (Miksa 208) by placing them in class T.

[6] According to Albert William Levi, "the incorporation of the fine arts into higher education is a fairly recent thing;" a commonplace now that was a radical idea in the mid-1800s (Levi 11). The distinction between academically taught disciplines and apprenticed skills predates the Romans (LaMontagne 68). In Europe, painting and sculpture were skills taught by master to apprentice in a workshop setting well into the seventeenth century (MacDonald 32). By the eighteenth century art academies had begun to take over the education of painters and sculptors, making a bid at the same time for the elevation of art over craft, for "art as a scientific subject, worthy of academic inquiry" (MacDonald 23). In seeking academic legitimacy, art had to combat "the classical dispraise of apprenticeship and the mechanical arts rooted in matter and repetitive practice" (Levi 13). One strategy for accomplishing this task was to distance fine art from craft as widely as possible (Auther xv).

[7] In a related manner, since photography was initially seen as a chemical process and a "technical wonder" (Bunting 44) it was classified in T rather than N. Colin Higgins points out that this places photography at a disadvantage, "a long way, spatially and intellectually, from 'Fine arts'" (Higgins 258). Many art libraries lament, or work around, artistic photography's separation from other art.

Class NK, Decorative Arts, represents an interesting rapprochement between art and craft. NK houses topics such as interior decoration, furniture, tapestries, and "other arts and art industries" including ceramics, glass, metalwork, and textiles. This class may have been created or expanded specifically to accommodate the Arts and Crafts Movement,[8] and indeed one of the first subsections of NK, NK 1135-1149.5, is devoted specifically to the Arts and Crafts Movement. Beginning in the 1860s, this movement brought the world of commerce into the realm of domestic ornamentation, as men like William Morris, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Louis Comfort Tiffany, Gustav Stickley, and Frank Lloyd Wright designed and produced furniture, glass and textiles. The Society of Arts and Crafts was founded in Boston in 1897. Morris, Stickley, Wright and other leading Arts and Crafts figures may have legitimated tapestry weaving, for example, not only as an art form but as a player in the marketplace. Museums began to acknowledge the importance of the Arts and Crafts Movement before the turn of the century: Shubert discusses decorative art museums like the Smithsonian Arts and Industries Building (founded in 1881), explaining that "a common purpose of these museums was to provide a historical study collection to aid contemporary designers and industrialists to increase the quality and standard of their manufactures". Publishing had also begun to acknowledge public interest in topics such as the hand-weaving of textiles, an interest tied to industry and economic activity as well as aesthetics (Shubert 78). This time period saw the publication of books like William Morris' *The Decorative Arts, Their Relation to Modern Life and Progress*

[8] There was no NK subclass in the 1903 LC Outline Schemes of Classes, though Fine Arts (N) was clearly separate from Mechanic trades and Domestic Science (TT and TX) (Library of Congress 1903). By 1907 NK was present, for *Decoration, Ornament, and Minor arts* (the "major" arts being painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and poetry [Auther xix]) (Library of Congress 1907, pg. 15). And by 1910 the term "minor" had been removed (Library of Congress 1910, pg. 16) and the subclass was renamed *Art applied to industry. Decoration and Ornament.*

(1878). As its sweeping title suggests, this work was not aimed primarily at the domestic sphere, unlike *The Ladies' Complete Guide to Crochet, Fancy Knitting and Needlework* by Ann Stephens (1854) or *Handicrafts in the Home* by Mabel Tuke Priestman (1910), both classed in TT. It is no surprise that great libraries began to take a similar approach at this time. Since the Arts and Crafts movement was changing the economic and cultural conversation about manufacturing and large scale production, such works clearly did not belong with Domestic science (TT-TX), where books on laundry, servants, children's craft activities, and other housebound concerns were to be found. The gendered nature of the two classes, both in terms of the sexes of the authors as well as the spheres of influence that the books were expected to limn/address, is also worthy of scrutiny.

Conclusion

American library classification sheds light on a much larger, ongoing, and at times quite contentious conversation about the nature and relationship of art and craft (Shubert 80). Melissa Auther has stated that "throughout the twentieth century the basic assumptions about craft's inadequacies vis-à-vis fine art were maintained and reinforced explicitly through classification and implicitly through critical categories such as the decorative" (Auther xvi). There are many areas in which inquiry into the decisions made by the creators of library classification systems can yield insight into their culture, their times, and cultural change over time. The classification system of the Library of Congress has been accused of "freezing the Zeitgeist rather than developing with it" (Higgins 255). If there is truth to that accusation, then Library of Congress classification presents an unparalleled opportunity to understand societal

attitudes regarding class, education, gender, and other concerns at the turn of the twentieth century. That this type of analysis is so seldom undertaken in library literature perhaps is indicative of the ongoing pragmatic nature of the profession, as hinted at by LaMontagne (LaMontagne 234). But engaging with these questions can provide a rich source of insight into our society, not only for librarians but for social scientists, historians, and other scholars.

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